NOTES ON IMPROVISED MUSIC

Memoirs and insights from the nineteen sixties to the two thousand twenties.

by Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen

2025 VERSION

CONTENTS

PREFACE

A GLANCE THROUGH THE DECADES
[Keywords characterising the situation of the world since 1950 and my music activity]

ENCOUNTERS WITH IMPROVISED MUSIC AND ITS PEOPLE
[A number of small sections chronologically]

TYPICAL CONFLICTS IN FREE IMPROVISATION
[Free improvisation is wonderful, but has its ups and downs. I believe we can learn from the conflicts we encounter]

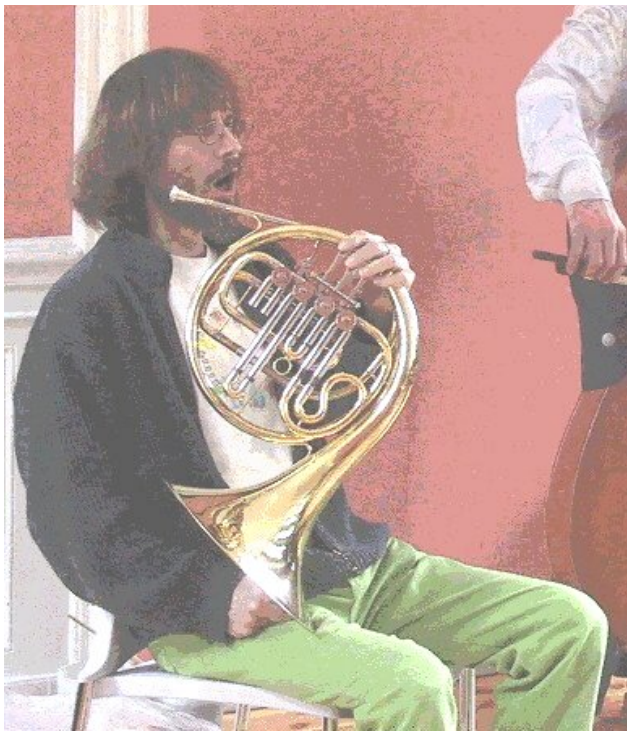
THE COPENHAGEN SCENE OF IMPROVISED MUSIC [Chronological account]
Collectivity among students and specialised ensembles
Copenhagen coming on the map
Friendly organisations and venues for improvised music
Non-public initiatives
Sustained activity

A LOOK AT THE GENRE OF FREE IMPROVISATION
Idioms
Pluralism
Sound and interaction
Verbal discourse
Internationally

COMPOSITION FOR IMPROVISORS
Why?
Before 1980. Experimental composers turning to improvisation.
After 1980. Games and pluralism.
Release practise
Greyzones in composition, authorship and perception
The Magic

APPENDIX: Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen CV as of September 2025

PREFACE



At a concert with Intuitive Music Group, 2000

Hello!

This text was written for fellow improvisors and composers and for anyone being curious at free improvisation and open compositions. Hence the title - memoirs may be rather personal while insights could be of a more collective and generally relevant nature.

The idea with this text is to pass information on the way I might do when talking to colleagues. Read about my various discoveries of music, musicians and places. About how the improvised music scene developed in Copenhagen. Instead of large historic accounts I have in the following chapters attempted to concentrate on what really matters: on typical difficulties - on aspects I think is especially worth noting about the free improvisation genre as well as about composition for improvisors.
History writing comes with a dilemma: it inevitably becomes subjective and fragmented. On the other hand, we need to know something about our predecessors and colleagues. We should be on guard against accepting mere legends and, in some cases, begin to interpret history anew.

Experimental music on an improvised basis is my innermost engagement as an improvisor and composer equally and has been so from the beginning of the nineteen seventies. The text covers a large time span, as I was born 1951. I took a long time to finish my university studies in musicology, had simultaneously an artistic career as improvisor and composer, and participating in organisational work became natural right from the beginning. People usually ask which instrument I play - other than the French horn on the picture, also various small instruments, like melodica and

chromatic mouth organ, and I use the voice. In my youngest days I played piano, but discovered the horn and other instruments after starting studies - with them it was easier to find other musicians to play with. After graduating working life became filled with teaching improvisation and related matters to music therapy students, and with making music therapy with clients. I made also programs on experimental music for the Danish Radio. Now after retirement, I have the privilege of taking time to write this text.

If you are simply a music lover - maybe you can discern between the lines something of the cultural drama taking place with experimental music through the times. If you are a composition student I hope some info is useful for you. Beware of the conservative views and methods, seek information your own way and follow your heart, form an ensemble, play with others. If you play or study, or if you make your living as a musician, take a look at the experimental repertory if you are not doing it already. Here, the tonal studies of scales, intervals, chords etc. do not matter at all, and there is no dogma as to how to describe the sound. So it is open for everyone, and seen from the other side there are ample opportunities for researching.

I have avoided self-promotion - the tendencies I wish to illuminate are collective efforts. I am sure you can find documentation of my work and of many of those others I mention elsewhere if you wish. Also, even being used to academic publishing in the fields of my music specialities including music therapy, I have refrained from the detailed reference practise usually employed in that genre of writing, keeping to only the most necessary ones. You may be able to retrieve more documentation if you search the internet[1], or you can ask me directly. Names I mention in the texts are just some that relate to the story in question, not exhaustive in any sense and thus not "fair" towards the many individuals I feel grateful to. Illustrations are not part of a systematic documentation, rather what I found interesting to include as something relevant for the eye to pause on.

You can contact me here: carlintdk[at]gmx.com. My homepage is intuitivemusic.dk

Humlebaek north of Copenhagen, Denmark, December 2025.

[1] In a number of cases, these bibliographic works can be shortcuts: Bergstroem-Nielsen, C. (2002): Experimental improvisation practise and notation: an annotated bibliography. Aalborg University's Research Portal, https://vbn.aau.dk/da/publications/experimental-improvisation-practise-and-notation-addenda-2000-pdf - and: Bergstroem-Nielsen, C. (2024b): Experimental improvisation and notation practise 1945-1999. An annotated bibliography. https://vbn.aau.dk/en/publications/experimental-improvisation-practise-and-notation-1945-1999-an-ann (don't worry, this link works of now even if it looks truncated. If it has changed, just search vbn.aau.dk)

A GLANCE THROUGH THE DECADES

1950ies
Cold war and space race. My parents invested in having the morning song session in my Kindergarten recorded on a lacquer disk which I still own.

1960ies
New kinds of popular music continue to emerge, culminating with The Beatles and a new youth culture. I was however into exploring classical music.

1970ies
were still hippie time in Copenhagen. I studied, lived in communes and made fundamental, compresensive discoveries within improvisation, composition, organisation and networking.

1980ties
Neoliberalism and yuppies. In employment life I met gymnasium pupils, music therapy students and clients.

1990ties
Computers began to impact daily lives in the form of PCs, eventually with internet. This boosted the endeavours of international exchange in European Intuitive Music Conference and my record company Intuitive Records.

2000s
USA declares "war against terrorism". I created several composition series strongly focusing on players' interaction.

2010s
Climate movement, covid pandemic. The latter spurred new experiences with video conferencing, in playing as well as teaching. Participating in online video events and initiating some.

2020s
Supporting Ukraine's defence against Russia becomes a common political issue in the Western world. Social media impact greatly the lives of children and young people, to the worrying of parent generations. Composition work exploring human interaction continues, not least in collaborations with musicians in Athens.

ENCOUNTERS WITH IMPROVISED MUSIC AND ITS PEOPLE

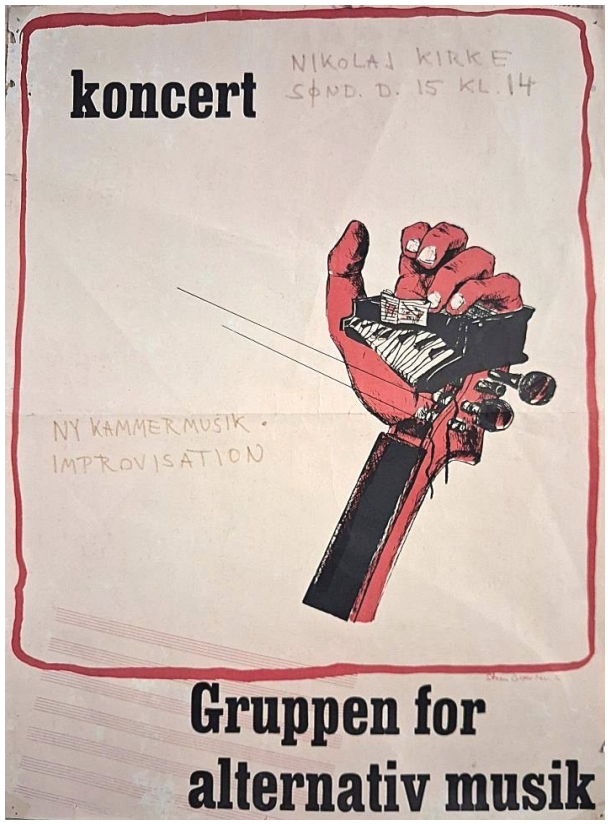
Not a CV, not a list of all important collaborations, but just some notes of pivotal and other encounters which I think tell some kind of relevant story to others. The paragraphs often extend through the years. If so, this is indicated by 'f' or 'ff' after the year.

1962 Mogens Wöldike

My primary school in Denmark included a boys' choir and a thorough solfège and voice training. At the age of eleven we participated in church services. The choirs' founder, Mogens Wöldike, was the organist and would often improvise during the service, and I listened with fascination. This was essentially a kind of Lutheran chorale based music as I remember it, but freely flowing, not confined to short phrases. The year before I had begun to learn to play the piano, and on this instrument I improvised in a similar style in my own way.

1972 Discovering free improvisation, Birgitte Alsted, Group for Alternative Music, Globokar, Karkoshka

Two years after having begun my music studies at Copenhagen University, I met violinist and composer Birgitte Alsted through the Group for Alternative Music. We did a couple of duo sessions that introduced me to free improvisation, just with a few keywords as starting-points. Being conditioned to classical music, this induced a strange passionate feeling in me of moving into a new kind of musical space, both very much my own but also one being shared.



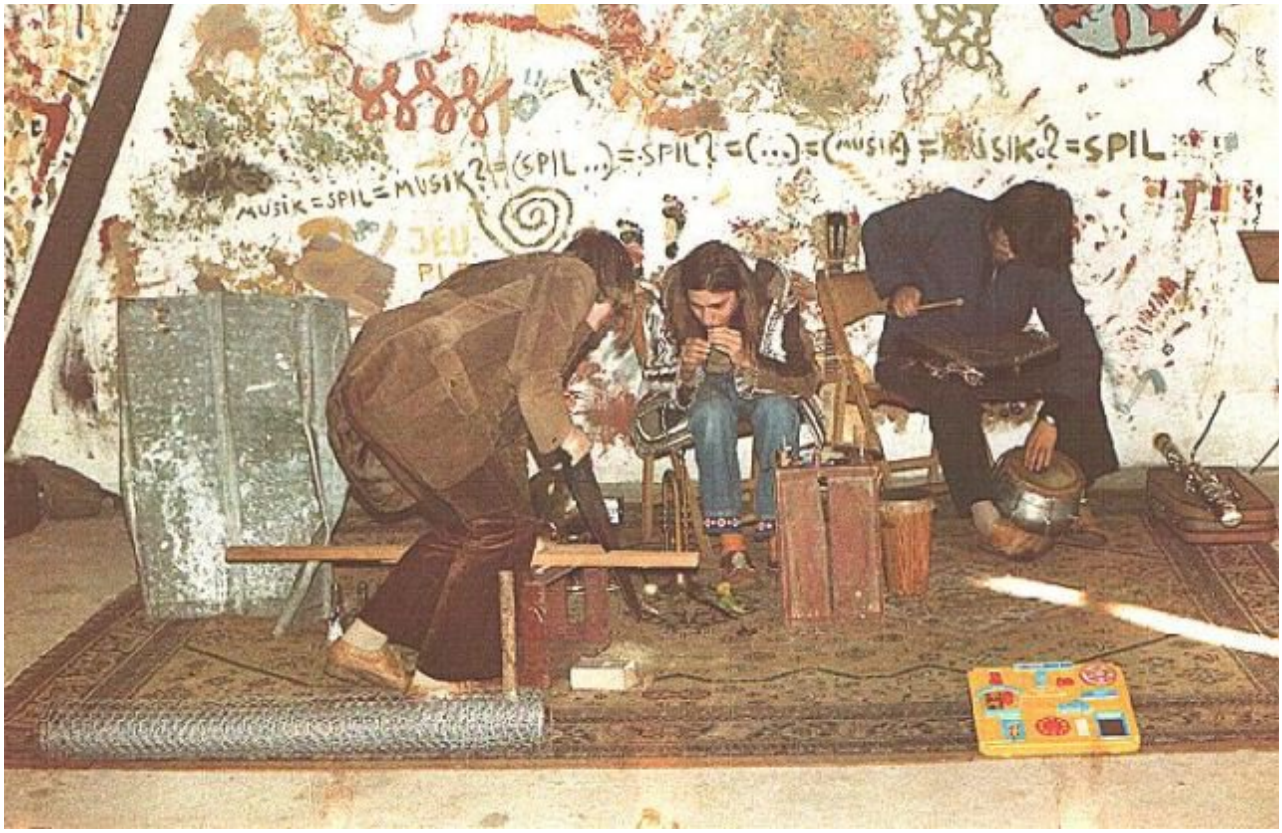
Poster for the Group by Steen Chr. Espersen

A little later I improvised with more fellow students and had one more seminal experience - of split-second nonverbal communication. Within less than a second, I could make a statement, have a response back, and already have moved a long way forward in the process of sounds being enriched with even more elements...

These experiences came on the background of having lead a nerd-like life during the later school years in the gymnasium. Music was played and listened to in my solitude, or within a small circle of friends. A special form of contemplation consisted in sitting in darkness behind closed curtains, wearing sunglasses and listening intensely to Beethoven's late quartets. But in ensemble playing I discovered a new way of socialising and collaboration. And in the *Group for Alternative Music* we had excellent possibilities to unfold our creativity, because there were many instrumentalists being available and we made often public concerts.

Two writers inspired and encouraged me greatly in improvisation matters: Vinko Globokar and Erhard Karkoshka. The former especially through describing musical roles which improvisors could have towards each other, between imitating and doing something opposite and a number of intermediary steps between. Karkoshka inspired me through his great confidence in group improvisation and precise, ambitious descriptions of the historical and music theoretically new and important elements becoming performable - such as timbres as well as the time continuum between shortest and longet. This was the perfect counterpart to conservative views which existed among a number of the university teachers, luckily with some exceptions.

Other composers of open works were Anestis Logothetis and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati. They both passed away in 1994, and I discovered too late I should have met them personally. Luckily this was not so with Karkoshka, and I contacted him in Germany by telephone and had a long conversation, despite international calls still beiñg expensive at that time. We met in his home in Stuttgart afterwards. I succeeded in convincing him that an improvisation with John Zorn and Vanessa Macness from Derek Bailey's Company 91 was not inferior to composed music, something he would not have believed before.



Group for Intuitive Music 1977 at "CEMD" - Center for experimental music and drama on the island of Seeland near Holbaek. Rehearsal of Cage: Variations III. From the left: Joergen Lekfeldt (founder of CEMD), myself, Anders Keiding. The concert hall was a former barn, paintings on the wall was done collectively by ourselves. Photo: Lene Duus

1975ff Group for Intuitive music - Karlheinz Stockhausen

In this year I went to a concert with fellow students entirely featuring Stockhausen intuitive pieces. I was acquainted with his music and that of other experimental composers at that time, but was struck once again (like maybe by the organ improvisations 13 years before) by this music's intense, organically flowing nature. The programme was multi-faceted with its individual pieces like other programmes, but the long processes invited a relaxed contemplation. I went to the co-founder of the Group for Intuitive Music which was performing, Jørgen Lekfeldt, and asked why I had not been asked to participate, and was immediately taken in as a member. This was the start of many years of playing and concerts with GIM. While the other founder, pianist Elisabeth Klein, only played in the first concert which had the form of a radio recording, Niels Rosing-Schow, Birte Mynborg, Anders Keiding were other members from that time, and Ivan Vincze became one in 1982. Our repertoire included among other composers than Stockhausen music by Earle Brown, Cage, Max E.Keller and our own ones. Last concert so far was in 2011.

In 1976, after one of the group's rehearsals, I took a whole week in which I substituted listening to others' music with repeated listenings to our playing. And was surprised to discover that each new listening brought different impressions! It pointed to the music being indeterminate in the listening perception. And, as I realise now, to listening being a creative act itself.

1983 Lekfeldt had invited Stockhausen to a dinner in his home during his Copenhagen concert visit, and we had long conversations with him. Among other things he stated that "intuitive music is an utopian vision, but I like that". He still felt very excited about his visit to Japan at the World Exhibition in Osaka 1970 during which more than a million people heard his music in a specially constructed round auditorium. But he added, humbly, that a million people is still next to nothing globally seen. This paradox has since then often come to my mind: our efforts to change the world remain local even when we have success, but they are meaningful anyway.

By 1996 we could see him in Copenhagen to dinner once more and continue the talk about intuitive music. I was thinking of how ways in which we play can influence each other in an assimilation process that might be able to bridge different styles. And I remarked that one could imagine a pluralistic improvised music, mentioning his own electronic composition Telemusic, in which known and new materials are juxtaposed. He did not find this idea interesting - in Telemusic, he said, the point was to to make transformations, whereas intuitive music was supposed to exclude the well-known.

Group for Intuitive Music with Karlheinz Stockhausen, 1983. Further from the left: Joergen Lekfeldt, myself, Lene Maack (standing), Ivan Vincze. Photo: Lene Duus

1977 Bruxelles and Ghent. Logos: Godfried-Willem Raes and Moniek Darge

The year before I had visited the International Summer Courses in Darmstadt, Germany and saw a note on a board about a Mixed-Media Festival in Belgium, inviting groups and individuals to participate. Off went the Group for Intuitive Music both 1977 and 1980. In addition to arranging a concert series at Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussel, Godfried-Willem Raes and Moniek Darge directed an information centre in Gent for experimental music comprising both recordings, a library and concerts series. An admirable institution declaring independence from the established educational ones and classical concert life - "no longer authoritarian scores nor relations between the members" a text from 1974 declared. "Creativity is not a speciality" was a statement coined by Moniek I quoted in a report for the Danish Radio. Raes was thrown out of the Gent Conservatory in 1970 as "anti-musical" - but times changes, he was asked in 1982 to return in order to teach contemporary

chamber music. 1990 he became professor and a pioneer of improvisation teaching in higher music education.

1978 London - David Toop, Steve Beresford.

In Gent at the Mixed-Media Festival the year before I had attended a concert with David Toop and Paul Burwell. I subscribed to the Musics journal and was excited about the many "Musicians' Collectives" emerging in Britain at that time. Toop was at that time deeply engaged in environmental and animal sounds, and I interwieved this quiet and thoughtful man. I went to Toop's Music and Context Festival. Here a regular community of improvisors with intensive concert activities existed, it was the flourishing time of London Musicians' Collective. One could meet and go to concerts with improvised msuic again and again! And the event calendar Time Out even recognised the existence of concerts with what they called "Jazz and improvised". Once, many years later, I was talking to colleagues about my London affiliation, and one of the others asked me at which time I had lived there. I was, however never in London for longer time than a few weeks. So were my feelings of, literally, local patriotism for this city!

In 1981 I arranged a concert in Copenhagen as a committee member of the Danish ISCM section with English Alterations ensemble, the members of which were Steve Beresford, Peter Cusack, Terry Day and David Toop. At that time maybe the organisational success was what I noticed the most. I had been out in Copenhagen at night, setting up posters describing the music as "new wave-inspired improvised music from England", and different types of people compared to those normally seen at classical concerts were among the audience. Later in 2000 I released a recording from this concert on the CD, Alterations Live as Intuitive Records IR 001, a record company founded together with Jørgen Lekfeldt, and it has become to me a monument of gorgeous, innovative humour and pluralism. Once in a letter to the Editors in the daily newspaper Information here in Denmark I had the role of defending the avantgarde music and used this as an example of a great affirmation of life. Cusack was allegedly inspired from pluralistic music during a stay in Holland. Beresford is, among other things widely known for his earlier participation in the "Porthsmouth Sinfonia", an amateur orchester active in the seventies playing short excerpts from classical music. The very special thing about it was that it sounded like

a parody of unskilled musicians but was meant rather as - maybe a revolutionary manifesting of everybody's right to play. In Alteration's improvisation, the use of known kinds of music by and others took place in the context of playfulness. It was quite telling that I heard Beresford in a solo piano performance 1978 playing with funny abrupt shifts wearing a tshirt saying "Quaack ProDUCKtions".

1982+83 - Chamber Ensemble of West Jutland (Vestjysk Kammerensemble)

During two consecutive years I participated in this ensemble's workshop for young composers, each time with an open composition of my own choice, and the way of working at the rehearsals could hardly have been more different. First time it was Postcard-Music which presents a short musical formula to be varied in improvised ways, and how this could be done was meticulously worked through - and the intense discussion went on even into the lunch-break! Next year the piece consisted only of 16 events having standard durations and a few hints to how some of these could be different from the others ("Frankfurt (M) Hauptbahnhof acht Uhr zehn"). I chose this after having got the feeling that this year we should not start with exercising details but rather "from above", and the sinfonietta had no reservations about improvising.

Ever since, it has been a favourite saying of mine that pieces with improvisation should suit the musicians playing. What is too detailed for one group may be too open for another one.

1983 Aalborg University and music therapy - Benedikte Scheiby, Inge Nygaard Pedersen

Scheiby and Nygaard Pedersen were fellow students who went to Herdecke in Germany to study music therapy and who became pioneers in starting up a new Danish education. I contacted them, we had a session together with the Group for Intuitive music, and I was invited to appear as a guest teacher. To my happy suprise free improvisation had a high status there. And I came to teach ensemble improvisation and aural scores to the students all the years till 2014. Our music therapy was primarily focused on the so-called active variety in which therapist and

client play together. - Parallel to the Aalborg teaching, I worked as a music therapist in Copenhagen.

Students came up with a lot of great statements about the free playing. One of these went like this:

> *"Starting at this course, I felt like having grasped a very juicy orange, but I had no idea of <u>what</u> to do, why I was to have sticky fingers (I would have liked a fixed form) - but the orange has a very nice scent"*

The psychodynamic understanding of music processes from music therapy deepened my own perception of how individuals can express themselves through improvised music - I found that romantic classical music could be trapped within a historic form which could have depressive aspects, due to historic influences. In music therapy, however, emotional expressions could be explored in liberating ways.

Our candidates now (2025) have long worked with a variety of client groups, from children to adults, in psychiatric, geriatric institutions and in those for the mentally retarded.

1984 John Cage

together with Merce Cunningham Dance Company, he made a rare visit to Copenhagen. There was a press conference in which Cage remarked about Cunningham with his typical tounge-in-cheek-humour that"he has trouble walking but no trouble dancing". Together with a colleague, I got an interview with him and we talked for around an hour at his hotel. Surprisingly, I did not find an outlet for this recording ever since. One thing I especially remember was that I made a point about rock music, stating that I enjoyed it myself. He got excited and provoked about this, even a bit angry-sounding, and replied that then I would have to accept authoritarian measures, police et cetera. This was a contrast to his very gentle and sensitive way. In the elevator on our way up, I gave him a bouquet of flowers, and he said quietly "thankyou", and added after a little pause sensitively "I like flowers". And he concluded our being together with politely mentioning he had something to be done.

1986 Young Nordic Music Festival

As a composer this was not the first time I participated in the festival, but the first time an open work by me was performed there. After some unsuccessful submittings in previous years I had given up and sent a more traditionally notated one for saxophone quartet which was accepted. Luckily, the performance was cancelled because of illness, and I was allowed to lead a rehearsal with a free piece chosen by myself, “Group-Game”. A prominent conservative Copenhagen critic suggested in his review the idea of the piece was obsolete, but the performance took place with humour and in a good atmosphere.

1990 First Luzern Congress for Improvised Music- Derek Bailey, Agathe Kaehr

I visited the first Luzerner Tagung für Improvisierte Musik in Switzerland and met a number of improvisors. Derek Bailey at his improvisation workshop did nothing in the direction of exercises but simply let us take turns to choose partners and play - like "Carl's trio", "Agathe's quartet", and so on, day after day. As if the implicit message was this: "Improvisation is a social experience - go and get it". One day he did not turn up, and I suspected strongly it was on purpose. We started to play on our own, and he appeared finally - the way he looked made it clear that this was not a trick, just an accidental being late from his side! But the only practical suggestion he ever gave us was a remark once that *"all groups need not be trios"*. Anyway, I gained important experience through this workshop that allowed us to simply dwell in the playing situations.

One more important experience was meeting a guitarist in playing who had sounded a bit like Jimmy Hendrix to me, and I was sceptic beforehand whether this could work out at all. Surprisingly it did, indicating that listening to each other could make everything possible.

Flutenist Agathe Kaehr was one more musician I met at that occasion. She told me she studied the flute in Berlin and attended a concert with AMM music in the early seventies, which included Cornelius Cardew. It filled her with such enthusiasm that she decided to move to London in order to live where this kind of music could be found at that time. I asked her what was so fascinating about the music, and after a thoughtful pause she answered - that the silence before they played was different. It had to do with the way in which they prepared themselves on the scene, she thought. Later, I interviewed her and got her to tell this story. When we edited it for a Danish

radio report I was a bit concerned whether this audio excerpt was too long in the radio lecture context, as she spoke slowly. However, the technician was deeply impressed and said it was OK! A beautiful story about the essential significance of concentration in music making.

It was also this congress that in turn led me to Exploratorium Berlin where I met its founder, Matthias Schwabe and have attended/participated in numerous arrangements through the years. He told me about his first meeting with the improvisation pioneer Lilli Friedemann in playing. To his slight surprise, she started out independently, without direct imitation.

1994 Chr. Wolff

During the Scratch Orchestra 25 years jubilee in London I had the chance to be near composer Christian Wolff during a common lunch, whom I admire as a pioneer of making experimental music interactive. At some point I could not resist the temptation to make an interview, made the equipment ready in a hurry and asked him with the microphone some questions. I remember his beautiful expression about his experience with the scratch orchestra, reflecting his love for making music together regardless of backgrounds. He said "my notion is that one *could* make forms of music in which a variety of skills and a variety of backgrounds - or lack of it even - could be used in very interesting and besutiful ways".

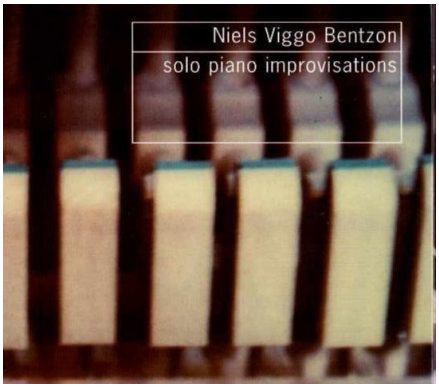
1996ff Goodiepal

In Aarhus city in Denmark, Odd Bjertnes arranged a Metaphonia Festival featuring among others Goodiepal as a wild young man. They played music by me, and Goodiepal continued to play my pieces in international touring. He is quite well-known at least here in Denmark due to a number of inventive media stunts - for instance stealing a machine from the Aarhus conservatory to take revenge after he was dismissed as a teacher - this brought him a criminal sentence and journalistic attention. But for me, our collaborations ground in his greatly inspired ability to combine differing sound sources in real time. In other words, he is a pioneer in pluralism within the music language in the sense discussed below in the section "A look at free improvisation" (and above with Alterations ensemble).

1996f Av-Art and Spor, Hasse Poulsen, Derek Bailey, Niels Viggo Bentzon, Steve Beresford, Lotte Anker

Hasse Poulsen, a Danish improvising guitarist, founded the record company Av-Art (meaning in Danish something like Off-Off-art). The aim was to bring out improvised music, and the medium was the CD. Peter Friis Nielsen and Lotte Anker and I were among the members of the collective. Before that, Poulsen had conducted a concert series under the same name and an accompanying journal, with Derek Bailey among the invited international names. The number of audience members at the Bailey event of maybe 40 shows that Bailey was at that time known in Copenhagen in some circles, but not to any large degree.

Among our releases, the Niels Viggo Bentzon one was special. This musician was well-known for his classicist compositions and for slightly Fluxus-like performances flirting with avantgardism in the sixties. The latter was as I see it an instance of typical Nordic distance to avantgardism and gentle humour. He loved to improvise, but only at the age of 77 someone cared to document it, while a plethora of his classicist compositions were long since out both in written form and on records! It took a young musician with a fresh view to rediscover and promote this side of him.



Cover of AACD 1004

Improvisation were for a long time controversial in Danish contemporary music circles. An international parallelism might be made with John Zorn who probably to this day (2025) in Danish (and other?) conservatories is known for traditionally notated compositions, hardly for his groundbreaking game pieces for improvisors, Cobra and many others.

At some point we in Av-Art suddenly caught interest in arranging concerts. Also, for some time, we met for listening sessions, sharing and talking about each others' favourite musics - a very nice activity I can recommend. A period of concert arranging followed. Steve Beresford and Rhodri Davies were among the invited musicians. There was also an entire concert with a selection of Stockhausens' intuitive music, first time in Denmark since 1974.

The year 2000 brought a split between Hasse and the rest of us. He had migrated to Paris where he continued his musician's career, and under the name of Spor the rest of us continued the concert activity for some years, before the activity peacefully expired.

Hasse Poulsen had a very energetic playing style. A remark from him once in the late nineties was that playing appeared as a physical need to him. It made me thoughtful to hear that from a fellow improvisor, since my own way to improvise focused mainly on exploring, listening and interaction.

1995ff Denmark's Intuitive Music Conference - Intuitiva - European Intuitive Music Conference

My friend Johan Toft had experiences of congress organising from the USA. We were about to arrange a common meeting for two improving ensembles from different parts of Denmark. And Johan believed there were unknown people "out there" who would like to meet us, so we should advertise for that. Indeed, some people came from other countries the first years, and it grew.

Logo with layout by Flemming Rinds.

Inspired from the wildly enthousiastic discussion at the very first meeting (and perhaps by my own interest in theoretical reflection) we have had a discussion session every time which I summarised in text form while I was into the direction till 2023, in addition to the many hours of daily playing, organised in different ways. According to organisational circumstances, the name was changed twice.

Among a large number of wonderful musicians at EIMC from 24 countries I have met and played with in this context till now (2025), Norbert Zajac is an improvising singer who was originally inspired by metal rock music. We seem to share a pluralist attitude similar to that described above with Beresford and Alterations, a feeling that everything can lead to everything. He participated in the ensemble VocColours since first part of the 2000- years which also improvised in a very flexible and versatile way.

With Vladimir Luchansky in 2017 I experienced a new way of playing with long, static sounds. My own way was pointillistic, that is, doing something short and pausing before next utterance. But suddenly I could see a point in his way too.

1999ff **Japan**

In 1997 a fax message reached me from Kumi Wakao in Hiroshima. She had read a notice in Gaudeamus Bulletin about our *Denmark's Intuitive Music Conference* and participated next year in Ringe, Funen Island in Denmark. Later she told me that a friend had suggested her not to go, because it looked to him too little structured. The announcement text read, among other things, “Dinner. Probably pizza”. Kumi Wakao was, however, sure this was exactly the right thing for her, less conservative than other contemporary music festivals, and she participated one more time in a later year. Her participation in the Danish meeting lead to four visits to Japan for me, last one in 2018.

Also to be mentioned among many others as prominent names in the Japanese context are her husband, Yu Wakao, further Daisuke Terauchi, Masatsune Nakaji, Hideo Ikegami, Shiba Tetsu, Yasuko Kaneko and last but not least Haruhiko Okabe, who visited Denmark several times and also organised concerts in Takematsu with other Danish guests.

Some of our concerts in Japan had a small workshop in the middle with audience members. I learned that there is a strong Japanese tradition for acting as a community, reaching back historically to work with rice cultivation. It demanded collective measures both with creating and maintaining infrastructure for irrigation, and when baby rice plants are to be planted in the basin. - The singing audience of non-musicians were wonderfully free of the Western tendency towards triads that reduces the polyphonic diversity, instead there could be a real multiplicity of voices. Whereas, within Western music, this could be made possible by experimentally trained singers conscioulsy avoiding the cliché, it just came about naturally here.

A compositional idea not known to me before appeared in a piece by Okabe. It was a duo notated in two parts with bar lines, seemingly the standard way. But for each phrase, coordination took place at beginning and end - in between beginnings and endings one should concentrate on the melody, not be counting beats. I was told this was the standard way of classical Gagaku.

2003f **Andrzej Izdebski**

Andrzej Izdebski is a Polish guitarist with whom I had a very long email correspondence 2003-04. He was critical of improvisors relying on interaction on exchange of utterances, I was critical about his ideal of mutual independence. In the end I found out I had to see him personally, and 2005 I visited him in Warsaw and played with him. Among his contacts was the Polish chamber ensemble Kwartludium - see later about my collaborations with them under 2011ff, Copenhagen Open Form Festival.

2007ff Alexis Porfiriadis, 6daExit, Stockhausen, WHI

A routine internet search revealed that some of my open compositions had been played at a workshop concert at a conservatory in Greece. This was the start of a long collaboration. 2014 I visited the man behind, Alexis Porfiriadis, in Thessaloniki. We discussed his current PhD project on how musical decisions are made inopen works, individually or collectively, and I visited the group 6daExit, an offshoot from Alexisis' workshops. It counted among others also Danae Stefanou, associate professor at the Aristoteles University there, who was also intensely engaged in experimental and improvised music. At the rehearsal with 6daExit I worked with Stockhausens' text for intuitive music Anhalt, in English: Halt. I discovered a discrepancy between the English and German versions and later contacted the Stockhausen Foundation. They sent me a scan of the authors' hand-writing which made it clear that the English version is correct. The German published version should end with "Suche Harmonie mit einem Mitspieler UND halte gleichzeitig still." For future costomers of the text collection in question, For Times to Come, they would include an erratum message correcting the German version of that piece.

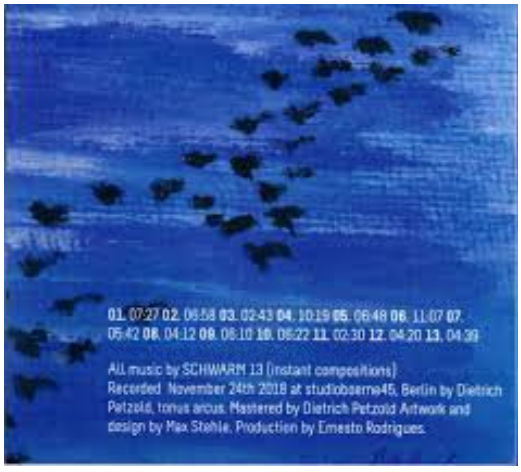
From 2019 and on, I gradually came to work regularly with the Athens WHI ensemble - the name at its founding was just for fun: "we have issues". It mixes trained musicians and amateurs, not unlike the German tradition among improvisors. Athens became an important place for me, providing opportunities for performances, inspirations for new works, workshops and acquaintance with other composers who worked in similar ways - other than Alexis Porfiriadis, Konstantina Samakovli (with Diathlasis vocal ensemble), Dmitri Papavasileou, Niki Krasaki, Ioanna Valsamara and Fani Kosona.

2011 **Copenhagen Openform Festival - Franz Hautzinger**

In the year of approx. 2008 I was sitting in a library and reading in the Swedish journal Nutida Musik about an Openform Festival in Oslo 2007 directed by Else Olsen Storesund and with Christian Wolff as an invited guest. My immediate thought was wondering why I had not been informed about that! I took contact and visited the 2009 festival in Oslo. By 2011 I organised a Copenhagen edition under the name of Copenhagen Open Form Festival - the biennale exists still at the time of writing (2025). This first one was, conveniently, also the place for marking round birthdays for me and fellow Danish composer Henrik Ehland Rasmussen who is one of the most productive and varied composers of open works. But later, many other composers of open works were featured.

In the year 2013 trumpeter Franz Hautzinger and pianist Manon-Liu Winther from Austria played in concerts and also gave workshops. I had heard them play previously at Exploratorium Berlin and was stunned at how intense and advanced in the treatment of timbre and transforming processes a free improvisation could be. At this festival, thanks to collaboration with a jubilee manifestation of Danish Composers' Society, I had the rare occasion to have the budget for inviting guests from abroad.

In his workshop, Franz Hautzinger did an astonishing job by just a small remark. The ensemble, consisting of improvising musicians from mixed backgrounds, had started with playing a free improvisation. After having taken time for this to happen and to conclude, Franz commented it, saying that it was a good and OK improvisation. However, for an improvisation to be more than that, to be really fascinating listening to, he could wish for a little more. He recommended for individual musicians to be aware of own impulses to play, to think before starting something, to determine whether there was a good idea or rather be silent and wait. After this, the next improvisation changed dramatically!



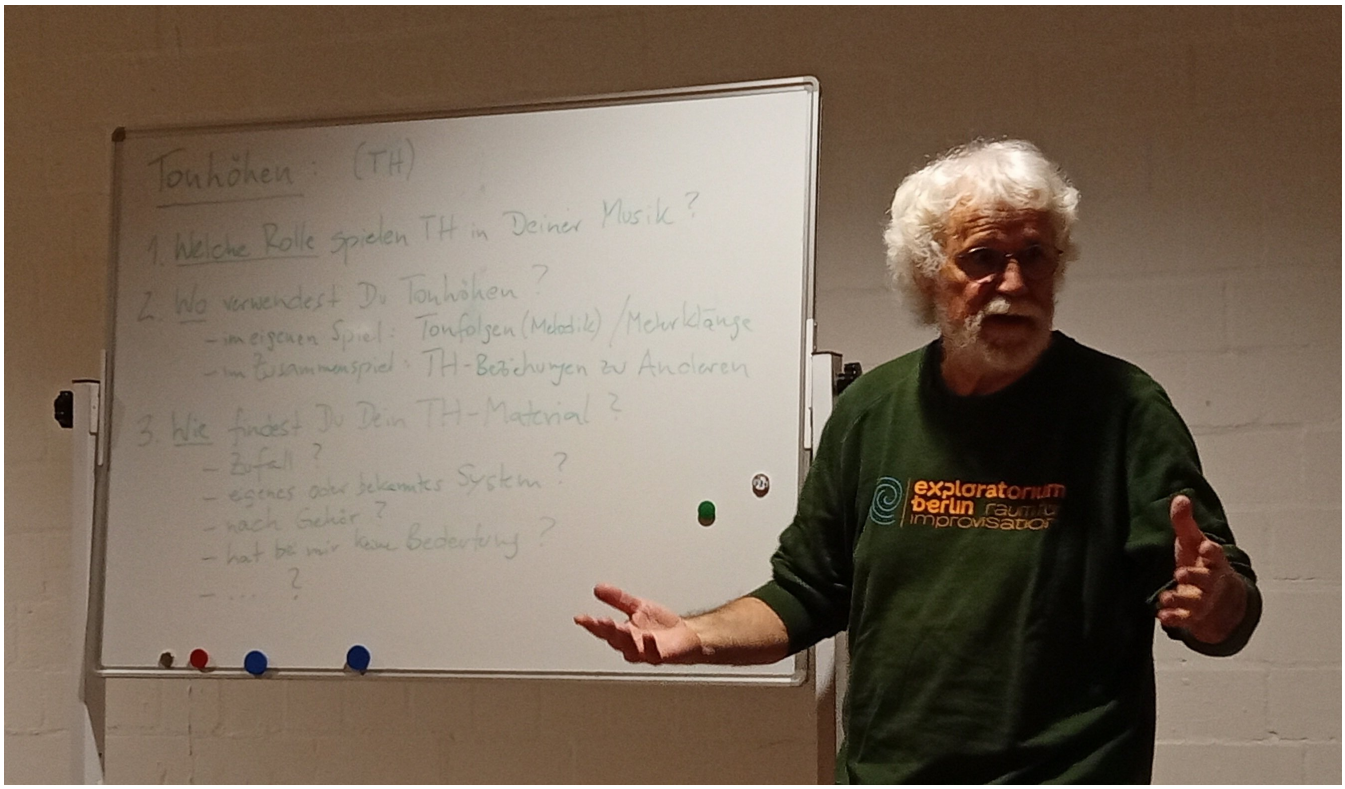
2014 Ruedi Debrunner and Max Stehle - Schwarm 13

2014, in a train together when travelling home from the Intuitive Music Conference, Swiss composer Ruedi Debrunner and German saxophonist Max Stehle designed the structures of *swarm sculpture* and *conversation, each of which*

in itself very well described the contrasting approaches and aesthetics of me and Andrzej previously. The idea was to avoid both the possible static chaos of certain free improvisations and the stiffness of certain compositions. These structures became the initial basis for the Berlin based "Schwarm 13" ensemble which still exists (2025).

2025 - time of writing

Of course, meetings, musical developments, networking, continuations of undertakings take place all the time. One peculiar workshop comes to my mind, by Matthias Schwabe, from Exploratorium Berlin 20 years jubilee 2024. "Pitches - experimental?!" was the title. We were invited to think over and experiment with how we used them ourselves, on our own, in interaction - and how we selected them, be it by random choice, by a system invented by ourselves or others, by musical reacting... - This topic and its perspective would have been unthinkable to propose in the seventies and maybe some years on, but appeared to me as a good and useful idea. It shows how used we improvisors had become to the free exploring of sounds, away from tonal systems.



Matthias Schwabe at his workshop at Exploratorium Berlin, 2024

TYPICAL CONFLICTS IN FREE IMPROVISATION

Two of Frank Maieu's posters for the Free Music Festival in Antwerpen

Free improvisation easily arouses the expectation that there are no do's and don'ts to feel restrained by. There is an opportunity to do exactly what feels right and to go into an exploration. However, certain conflicts seem standard.

Traditional versus open material appears as a most basic issue. In much experimental, composed music and with many improvisors as well, the basis for the music is seen as sound in a broad sense. Whereas with some other musicians, there is an adherence to not lose sight of traditional systems of scales and melodies, as well as of some kind of ongoing pulse. The following points of conflict may often be seen as related to this fundamental one:

- *motoric playing with pulse versus taking silence as a basis*. For some, it seems natural to make the music resemble popular music characterised by an even flow,

with repetitions, dense overall sound and constant dynamics. This might have the ultimate background in the popular functions of dance music in which the music is there to support an ongoing moving activity, and it also needs to make itself heard. Others rather stress that one should only play if one has something to say, and also stress the openness of the moment, the openness towards interaction and the creative role of pauses. Musicians with classical music backgrounds often tend towards this attitude. After all, classical symphonies, for example, became vehicles for long explorations into musical fantasies, and listeners in the concert halls were expected to behave silently, in the interest of concentrated listening.

- *equity of players versus hierachies and fixed roles*. Many improvisors see their music form as place where to realise a collaboration between equals, maybe even of an utopian kind - they emphasise the group creativity and are against anyone constantly dominating. Whereas others stay more or less with certain roles they are used to - for instance, saxophones and other melody instruments as the leading ones, bass as the accompanying one, piano as the overall leader.

What makes this latter problem complicated is the fact that much happens unconsciously. Driven by personality and habits, it is quite normal that dominating persons are not aware of how much space they take up. Others may be shy, avoiding initiative, only manifesting themselves with minor additions to what is already there.

There is no absolute dogma telling us how we should solve such conflicts. One can have a conversation after playing - sharing experiences can indeed have a strong effect on subsequent playing. The shy ones may need encouragement. One favourite notion of mine is that humour can resolve many situations, including my own possible frustrations - "of course the others are playing wrong, but we can have fun anyway".

This is the point where educational and introductory systems try to sort things out. Authors and workshop leaders may suggest taking pauses and listening to each other. They may also suggest ways to make the music more varied and interesting together.

Even if "you cannot play anything wrong" is a common statement, it appears that some kinds of playing are in practice better than others. This leads easily to a

conceptual paradox and to discussions around the word "freedom", having the possible obvious conclusion that "freedom is being free to act within the limits of the situation". But again, what are these limits?

It appears that any group of improvisors must find out for themselves. Within what is still called free improvisation, they may learn to adjust to each other and strive towards their own artistic credo. [They could also develop common habits which could both consist of something they share with others within their region, or just their very own. It is also common to strive for a development of constant innovation, to search out of fixed habits.]

The conflict types mentioned here may appear with people having no or little previous training in free improvisaiton. But they certainly also appear frequently with trained musicians. And nothing prevents musicians to be eclectic and consciously practise their own mixture of traditional and new.

Two more of Frank Maieu's posters for the Free Music Festival in Antwerpen

With an attempt to say it humouristically, confusion is here to stay. And so are surprises in playing - sometimes very pleasant ones indeed. I find much wisdom in Tim Hodginson's statement to the effect that any improvisation is the story about

what did *not* happen[2]. Because at so many points during an improvisation, possible roads forward may be perceived, yet things happen as they do. Chronic conflicts in a group may lead to its dissolving. But playing with unknown people may be seen both as keeping the situation flowing and as part of the general risk-taking belonging to the music form...

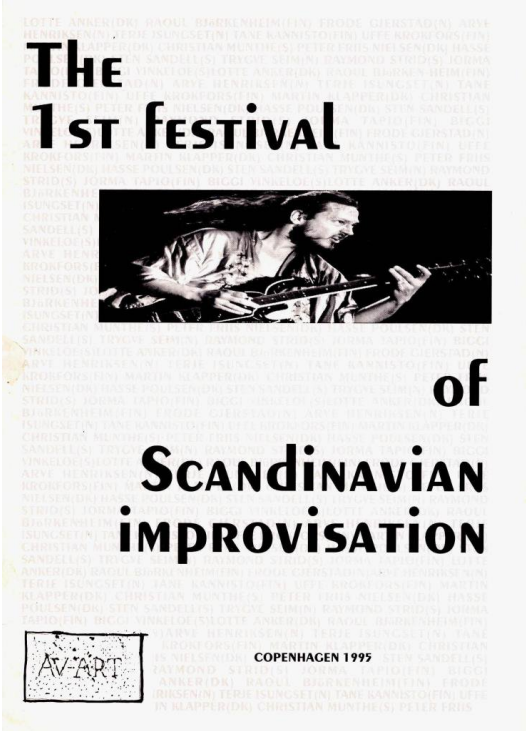
[2] Hodginson, Tim: "A rich field of possibilities: strategies and indeterminacy in free improvisation", *Resonance* 8,1, 2000.

THE COPENHAGEN SCENE OF IMPROVISED MUSIC

Copenhagen was known to have been a fertile place in the fifthies for freejazzers, and some ensembles continued on this basis, with Danish based John Tchicai as just one name. Free improvisation activities began to flourish in the late nineteen sixties, seventies and on in the Western world with London as a main European center.

Collectivity among students and specialised ensembles

I did not hear of free improvisation on a non-jazz and non-church basis before I, as a young music student, stumbled into the *Group for Alternative Music*. This was a gathering of fellow students who supplemented their study with improvising together and arranging their own concerts. It existed from 1970 to 1977, and I came into it in 1971. The first concert activity was so-called "mammooth" ones taking place at the conservatory with many participants.The activities mentioned may today sound quite innocent, but they were unusual at the time and were perceived by ourselves as revolutionary. We became portrayed in TV, and concerts were relatively well attended. They could be held at unusual places, such as at a railway station, and in a boat in the canals in summertime, but many of them also in the Nikolaj Church (which for long had been a municipally driven art place with no church services). The City of Copenhagen provided economical funding. We published the journal *bladet* bearing the motto: "any form of censure indicates ideological capitulation". Another statement in the same spirit was that of Gunnar Colding-Jørgensen in bladet (June 1973) which underscored the emancipative potential in music-making and related it to classic Marxism: "*If people first begin to take over the instruments, how far are they then from taking over the means of production?*"



Most of the music we performed was in the form of compositions which could of course also be open to improvisation. A common saying among us was that *composers need not be dead*. Later well-known composers like Hans Abrahamsen and Niels Rosing-

Schow were intensively involved. Classical/contemporary/experimental music forms could without effort be mixed with other musics in the programmes due to the general pluralist attitude, but popular forms appeared only exceptionally - the later mixing and interpenetration of musicians' circles had not taken place yet. The Group became known for being inspired by the *new simplicity*, inspired by composer Henning Christiansen, but this was by no means the only tendency.

In the latter half of the seventies and during much of the entire eighties, improvised music in Copenhagen hardly had a "scene" but appeared in glimpses in concert life from time to time. This could happen under the auspices of the Danish ISCM-Section, DUT (Det Unge Tonekunstnerselskab), often in educational contexts for children.

Group for Intuitive Music (see also the mention in the previous chapter, Encounters with improvised music and its people) was active from 1974-2011 and appeared in its own concerts from time to time with the intuitive pieces by Stockhausen and other experimental repertory, including our own compositions. The name of another group named Intuitive Music Group indicated that it saw itself as related in its aims to the Group for Intuitive Music mentioned above. It had several music therapists as its members, among them Henrik Ehland Rasmussen, Bodil Wellendorff, Niseema Munk-Madsen and myself, and it had collaborations with visual artist Palle John Nielsen. It was active approx. 1992-2005. Yet another offspring bearing "intuitive" in its name was the Bela Hamvas group for Intuitive Music, a gathering of people from Slavic Eastern countries, and The Intuitive Trio, both called together by Ivan Vincze. They were active with concerts approx. 1996 - 2004.

Guitarist Hasse Poulsen founded *"Av-Art"* in 1995 which gave out a journal and held ambitious concerts, inviting Derek Bailey and a number of other international musicians, without much attention from the wider public sphere. As already mentioned above, it also gave Danish pianist Niels Viggo Bentzon an opportunity to appear in concert with free improvisations.

Copenhagen coming on the map

Copenhagen was "put on the map" of cities with regular concerts (more or less, at the beginning) of improvised music as I like to assert it, with *1st Festival of Scandinavian Improvisation* arranged by Hasse Poulsen in 1995. This lasted 3 days and brought prominent musicians related to the free jazz scenes together from the Nordic countries, but the music was the European variety of free improvisation improvisation, compared to that of the sixties. It appeared to have caught the attention of critics on a scale not seen before for free improvised music, and to have had a lasting effect on subsequent media attention. Newspapers had begun to use the word "improvisation musician"" Hasse Poulsen wrote in an internal report.

After the festival, Av-Art Records became established as an association with a committee that included also improvisors Lotte Anker, Henrik Ehland Rasmussen, Morten Carlsen, Sture Ericson and myself. Not long after it continued the concert activity on a regular basis with both Danish and international musicians. In 2000 there was a split. Poulsen settled in Paris, while the others continued the concert activity under the name of Spor, until 2006.

Improvisation having become more visible in concert life, concert association *Kanten* ("The Edge") had an artistic line similar to Av-Art and Spor and was active for some years.

Tryllehaven (The Magic Garden) was a project led by Felix Becker - arranging improvised concerts at every full moon during 1999-2001, on an empty building plot - until this was used for building a regional center of the Copenhagen part Vanløse.

Friendly organisations and venues for improvised music

Skræp, a gathering of experimental musicians from non-classical contexts, playing own compositions at its concerts was formed 1988 and featured both its own members and international guests at its concerts. It could still be seen active in 2022. A few member names are Pierre Dørge, Irene Becker, P.O. Jørgensen, Christer Irgens-Møller and Dan Marmorstein.

Skraep member Søren Gorm caught the idea of having a concert with improvised music within the court yard of the police headquarters in Copenhagen. This happened 1996 when Copenhagen was Cultural Capital of Europe and was a historical retrospective event pointing back to the serious street figtings between police and demonstrants in 1993 still feeling recent in public memory and having echoed in the news press internationally,. Guest musician Han Bennik and some Danish members of the group played on police remedies, including wooden boxes having contained ammunition. The Police's own orchestra was also a part of the concert, with pieces from its repertoire.

From the programme of the concert inside the
Police Headquarter of Copenhagen, 1996.

I was told some details of how this concert came about, adding to the astounding fact that the police accepted to host this concert at all. During a meeting, someone from Skræp proposed the date of 18.May, upon which the police quietly answered "you really mean that one?". The one proposing the date had forgotten it was that of the street battles. A new proposal was quickly taken care of.

Not having a specialised focus on improvised music but always friendly to it was through all the years *Huset i Magstræde* (The Magstraede house) the history and traditions of which dates back to the 68-movement. It houses several scenes the names of which has changed through the times. In 2005 Paul Opstrup who was in

charge of the booking of experimental music moved his activity to a new place to which he had raised the finances, creating a Copenhagen Literature House. Paul told me that he was sorry for shifting the focus from music to literature but he thought there was a strong need for such a house. I could reply on the background of my experiences with the venue that to me it appeared that the synergy of these two art forms might well drive more people to the music performances who knew the house in advance than if it were known primarily for music. On his initiative, a new venue for non-standard musics was created in 2009 together with Björn Ross, a specialist in early classical music. The new venue was, like Literaturhaus, a former church and was called Koncertkirken (The Concert church). The initiative came to its completion in 2015 when the proporty became owned by a co-operative. - Another venue presently named *Alice* has a long history of connection to the folk and world music scenes.

For some years up to 2013, Copenhagen had an *open scene* for improvisors in Huset i Magstræde in the tradition of a free forming of ensembles on the spot which would one after another play for the others and for the audience present. It was organised by Adam Pultz Melbye. Despite the success for improvised music in later years, it has not yet re-emerged at this time of writing (2025).

The *Red Cross Culture House* - "the most international place in town" as we called it - was the concert venue for the 30 years jubilee concert of the Group for Intuitive Music in 2004 and other concerts around that time.

Festival of Endless Gratitude is a festival for experimental music which "spotlights innovative, experimental and emerging sounds as well as overlooked traditions and genres". Founded 2008 and still happening (2025).

*Wundergrun*d, later called *Gong Tomorrow* , arranged annual festivals 2006-2023. They aimed effectively at crossing genres in their programming. Film music, Middle East music could appear side by side with classical experimentalists. The organisation behind was *SNYK*, an organisation which was founded by classical contemporary composers 2000. After a right-wing govenment 2003 closed down the former Music Information Center, SNYK assumed more resonsibilities. The new name stood for "Sekretariat for ny kompositionsmusik" (Secretariat for new composed music). I attended most of its meetings including the preliminary ones and had the happy

experience of improvised music becoming stated in the organisations' presentation texts, after my frequent mention of it at the discussions. Snyk came to represent a large number of ensembles and institutions in a unique way, and in my impression, we had good confidence and absence of quarrels in what Wundergrund, under the committee, did for us with its concert direction at the general PR level for unusual music, despite the diversity of its members. So it appears that what was from the political side torn down had been rebuilt and even innovated with the Wundergrund festival. *Art Music Denmark* was a new name after becoming genre organisation for classical music too in 2002, and the organisation was changed into a top-down one. This could be due to its increased official funding accompanied by an increasing degree of detailed economic control.

Mayhem, outside the city centre but accessible with public transport, is according to its homepage a venue for "*extreme and experimental music* " and has existed sinze 2009.

Non-public initiatives

An initiative which gathered both dancers and musicians was *Meet da lama* which existed 2004-2005 and was started by singer Helle Thun. It was not public, but it testified to the increasing pluralism and natural occurrence of improvisation. "da lama" was the name of a sampled sound and did not signify anything Tibetan. According to my collection of announcements, it had 7 arrangements taking place in Literaturhaus.

Yet another non-public initiative was the monthly music improvisors' meetings held by guitarist Dalia Faitelson 2015-2018 in her rehearsal room. Even without mentioning any names of participants it can be said that it made meetings possible between a large number of older and younger, known and lesser known musicians.

Sustained activity

For a short period, there were even two wine bars in Dr. Tværgade, Copenhagen, featuring improvised music. "Peryton" was one of them, run by "lutter øre" (simply ear / ear all over) 2018-2019.

"*Jyderup Accordion træf*" was a course over a week in Danish High School style, held in Jyderup High School annually 2014-2000, including invited well-known American maverick improvisors coming to teach. Some of them played also at 5E while visiting Denmark.

"5E" was a venue primarily for improvised music 2013-2020, with weekly Monday concerts that could start at seven in the night and last beyond midnight - organised into modules of one hour per band or soloist. It was housed in a relatively small room, formerly a stable at Copenhagen Flesh Market, but it had a wood stove spreading a nice atmosphere in the winter. It was founded and curated by drummer Kresten Osgood. Its musicians were to a high degree from the new Rhytmic Music Conservatory (conservatory for jazz and rock etc, founded 1986 ... where Osgood was a teacher).

With 5E, the international visibility of improvised music in Copenhagen increased. However, this situation improved further when the near by *Klub Primi*, also called *H15* , became a competitor and soon after, took over. While musicians in 5E played "on the door", that is, were given a share of incoming admission fees, the new venue started to pay regular fees. It proclams as its motto to be for *"creative, improvised and genre-free music"* (Kreativ, improviseret og genrefri musik).

Copenhagen Openform Festival was already mentioned above in the section "Meetings with improvised music and its people". From 2011 til this time of writing (2025) it has as a biennale presented a large number of Danish and international composers and musicians.

What a development for improvised music during more than fifty years since the early seventies! Even remaining underground compared to other genres, it has become an underground more easy to find. Pioneers, venues' capacities, concerts and non-public network activities, spontaneous initiatives and sustained work, economy, institutional changes including innovative new ones have all played a role.

A LOOK AT THE GENRE OF FREE IMPROVISATION

A striking and concise description of the background on which free improvisation emerged comes from journalist and concert organiser Bert Noglik who in 1990 stated that the '

> *''sound-investigating' qualities of freely improvised music come from composed new music, whereas the 'interactive' aspect comes from jazz.*[3]

Of course this is a generalisation, but highly justified. These words fell at the first International Conference for Improvisation, in Luzern.

Idioms

Derek Bailey stated 1980 a notion of *non-idiomatic music* which became very well-known. According to this, free improvisation is outside the idioms, or genres - one does not "play jazz", for instance, but rather considers the music to be unpredictable and created in the moment. An objection to Bailey's notion of "non-idiomatic" is that musicians may move out of usual kinds of music, but they still have personal idioms which are recognizable. In 2000, Michael Bullock coined the term "self-idiomatic" acknowledging this fact. This year (2025), Diego Kohn proposed to me to update the notion still further to "multi-idiomatic" or "poly-idiomatic".

This I think is a good example of how an originally striking and informative concept can be updated along the historic way. When the "non-idiomatic" notion was launched by Bailey, it was indeed new, and for many years a common assumption I often encountered, and still may hear, was whether it might be a kind of jazz. Something completely "outside" of known genres was not imaginable. However, a more down-to-earth view paved its way after the idea of emancipating from known genres had become rather a matter of course and outworn. As I like to say, it is obvious for me that the way I improvise has something typical which I can easily recognise when listening to recordings, even if I work to develop my attention to the

[3] NB: this statement was spoken. Unfortunately it was not directly stated in his article "Improvisation als kulturelle Herausforderung. Zu Spielhaltungen, Specifika der Rezeption und zur sozialen Relevanz frei improvisierter Musik", in Fähndrich, Walter (ed.): *Improvisation. 10 Beiträge.* Winterthur (Amadeus Verlag), 1990. What was translated here from German as 'sound-investigative' was "klangforschende", while 'interactive' was the same word, 'interaktive'

universe of possible sound. And everyone else has some typical way being her or his. Musician Robert Rizzi's statement from 2000 that

> *"improvisation takes place on top of everything else the musician has worked with"*

appears, interestingly, still to be correct. Finally, Diego Kohn, as pointed out above, points to the nescessary pluralist aspect - improvisors are bound to navigate within different self-idioms.[4]

Fortunately, we also communicate! When listening together to a recording, it happens from time to time that we cannot discern who played a certain statement. I view this as a happy situation.

Pluralism

It is often a special attraction for improvisors to deal with different fellow musicians, to seek challenge in meeting new people and to try out new constellations. Some have put forward philosophical statements about this dealing with difference – that is, pluralist views. Steve Beresford talks about conflict as a productive factor:

> *"The improvised music performances which don't work for me are those which are exactly trying to project an image of pure music which doesn't have the same problems that most music has and that most life has".*

According to this, the idea is being true to the problems of real life also in music making. Avoiding the mistake of "pure music", deconstructing this notion so to speak, brings about liberation, variety and individuality. This view implies that conflicts can be creatively dealt with. The graphics below seek to illustrate this.

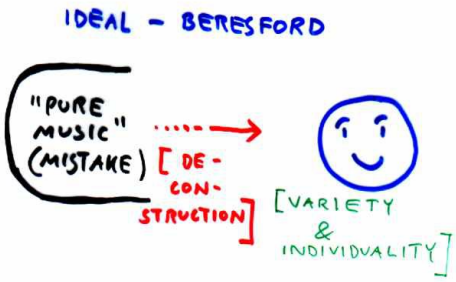


Illustration of the Beresford idea of avoiding the mistake of "pure music".

[4] Bailey, D. (1992). Improvisation: its nature and practise in music. 2 nd ed. (Originally publ. 1980) The British Library National Sound Archive.
Bullock, M. (2010). Self-Idiomatic Music: An Introduction. Leonardo Music Journal 43(2), 141-144.
Kohn, D. (2025). Email to this author.
Rizzi, R. (2000). Telephone conversation with this author.

Saxophonist Evan Parker had a funny metapher describing the balance between homogenity and heterogenity in playing together. A good situation is one that can be compared to the special English "cheese and pickle sandwich" – it is both sweet and sour at the same time. If the players are too far from each other there is no sandwich at all, and if the common ground is too strong and wipes out players' differences then that would be like "a cheese and picle sandwich in the blender".[5]

Cheese and pickle sandwich – Evan Parker's metaphor for healthy co-existence...

An additional background inspiration for the pluralism could also be collage-like works by experimental classical composers like Ives, Berio and Stockhausen.

Sound and interaction

Yes, free improvisation is unpredictable and "everything" can happen. Even so, there is an important background stemming from experimental music: the abandonment of the tonal system. Hugo Cole has stated a gorgeous metapher about this matter. Avoiding so-called disharmony was a vital principle - comparing with railway operation, trains must not be allowed to collide. But :

Make trains of soft rubber, and the timetables can be relaxed" .[6]

The deep imprint from the tonal system seems also responsible for habits of perceiving music as a structure of moving harmonies with melody at the top, bass at the bottom and some less conspicious parts in between to make the chords complete. Instead, one can view the structure as different voices reacting to each other. Strangely enough, the old term "polyphony" has referred to strucures thought out by one composer, not independent voices.

[5] The quotes by Beresford and Parker are here:
Cusack, Peter (ed.) (1978): "The Music/Context Seminar LMC, August 2nd", *Musics* 20, dec.
Stanyek, Jason (1999): "Articulating Intercultural Free Improvisation: Evan Parker's Synergetics Project", *Resonance* 7,2.

[6] Cole, Hugo: *Sounds and sign. Aspects of musical notation*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1974, p.151-52.

Verbal discourse

Improvisers are thoughtful people - during sessions without audience the conversations in between playing can get quite philosophical. Despite the music's modest role within international culture, improvised music is rather well covered in writing - not least in articles and Ph Ds. Reading and summarising in my bibliographies (see footnote 1 under the Preface of this entire text) has become a passion for me. Documentations, theory, graphic and other new notations, psychology and philosophy. I am always glad to have inquiries (see my email in the Preface).

Internationally

We live in an international world and can benefit from others' experiences and history far away. For example, the impact of American John Cage on the way in which experimentalists in music think of what they are doing is still strong, measurable from how often his name is mentioned. He both showed a way forward and may be a source of sparring.

But beyond this general transparency, free improvisation is especially in need of having people and ressources enough to form a so-called *critical mass*. That is, the minimum size for sustaining itself and being fit to act and develop. For example, sustaining an ensemble after the students days into all the ensueing decades has not always been easy in Copenhagen. On the other side, I believe that Danish people have good backgrounds for international work due to education and not least to the fact that our language is not spoken or understood internationally beyond to some extent in the Nordic countries. So we have to speak foreign languages. And generally, as an experienced colleague strikingly said, "*it's a big world, but the scene is small*".

Consequently, I can most warmly recommend travelling to encounter destinations which possess large milieus for improvised music. London is credited to be the place where non-jazz improvised music originated and has several prominent venues. Berlin has many smaller venues and the large Exploratorium Berlin which features several monthly open scenes as well as concerts and a large number of workshops. Switzerland has a specialised education program where one can become a M.A. candidate in free improvisation. Japanese cities excel in a speciality of small cafes as venues for improvised music - in Tokyo you can probably still find a concert with improvised music for every day..

I had a beautiful experience in Tokyo in 2009, playing a duo concert with contrabassist Hideo Ikegami at such a small cafe. The audience consisted of only one member, a stout man. According to customary usage, he gave drinks to us in the pause, and asked us questions about our view of improvisation. There was nothing surprising in all this so far. But afterwards I asked Hideo about the man, expecting he knew "everybody" being likely to turn up, as he had played countless gigs with countless other improvisors. He did not! The stout, unknown man was probably on his way home again. And we had made improvised music a bit more known to one more human being.

***

COMPOSITION FOR IMPROVISORS

Composition for improvisors will be described here as of two separate periods: the "classic" one before 1980, and the recent time after 1980, in which backgrounds for composers and musicians may be much more mixed. Names will be mentioned but their selection could be both larger and different. Playing these open compositions, as I like to call them, takes place while improvising freely or in ways like those decribed below.

My knowledge of early experimental developments within jazz and rock (Sun Ra, Coleman, Globe Unity Orchestra, AACM members...) is too sparse to deal with it substantially - you need to seek this information elsewhere.

Why?

My first ensemble improvisation experiences were already described above in the chapter named Encounters with Improvised Music and its People. It remains here to be added that during these years I was also working with composition inspired by experimental music of the time I had heard, both electronically and for instruments. Ultimately I came to the conclusion that detailed composition was boring in the end. Comparable to making a lecture, just hearing one's own voice and experiencing nothing new, possibly over long working sessions. While when improvising, there was a creative dialogue that could lead the music to great spirited heights, both as to sound that could arise, and to the timing, all the way down to the micro levels. I could add that the old detailed form allows for both "letting out steam", expressing oneself, and for researching special areas. But the old notation is hopelessly bound to the systems of twelve tones and countable rhythms whereas experimental music has discovered new sounds. And continuing the historical outlook concerning performance, old hierachies have been relinquished, as evident in the prominence of improvisation in contemporary popular musics.

So should we abandon composition altogether? Absolutely not. We should follow the spirit in this quote by Igor Stravinsky:

> *"Tradition is entirely different from habit, even from an excellent habit, since habit is by definition an unconscious acquisition and tends to become mechanical, whereas tradition results from a conscious and deliberate acceptance. A real tradition is not the relic*

of a past that is irretrievably gone; it is a living force that animates and informs the present."[7]

Read this long quote again... isn't the comparison with real estate and its maintenance striking? A house must be repaired from time to time in order not to become ruined, and adaptions may become necessary to new historical needs. If we accomplish a conscientious mantainance and take the inevitable trouble of working out something new, then tradition becomes relieved of the constrains stemming from the mismatch between past greatness and contemporary needs and visions, relieved of the melancholy of being inside a "museum".

For my part - it has been fantastic experiences to hear pieces being played repeatedly by different ensembles who of course do it differently. And I also aim to create a sturdy piece of design that functions well for different instruments and people. While Ligeti compared compositions to "monuments", my ideal would rather be comparable to creeating good household objects.

Before 1980. Experimental composers turning to improvisation.

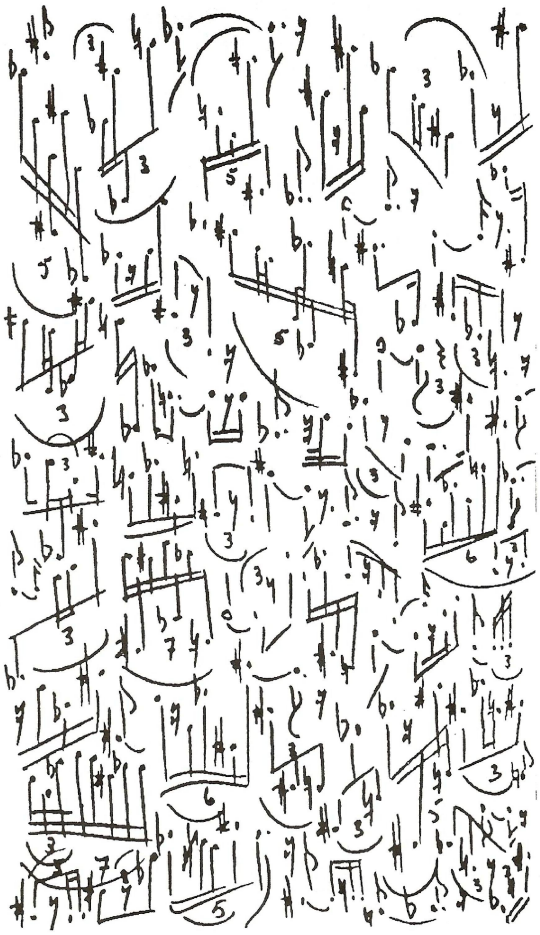
I was not the only one thinking in this way. Franco Evangelisti around 1960 gave up composing for a period of time and founded instead the improvisation group *Gruppo Nuova Consonanza* which worked with a sort of minimal composition based on gradually laying down things through rehearsing. In the USA, Lukas Foss developed compositions for improvisors as early as 1957 with his *Improvisation Chamber Orchestra*. Erhard Karkoschka emphasised that with improvisation, nuances of timbre could be created which went beyond what was possible with traditional notation. Vinko Globokar stated that a true "humanising" of music had to involve the performers, and he proposed to compose with differentiated roles for the parts so as to work with their interdependence.

Prominent composers at that time were working with improvisation - Globokar toured extensively in Europe with New Phonic Art, Frederic Rzewski worked with *Musica Elettronica Viva* and wrote text scores. Cornelius Cardew founded the S*cratch Orchestra*, the members of which even also made small compositions/games, while Cardew himself wrote variously notated compositions including text scores and

[7] Igor Stravinsky: Poetics of Music in the form of six lessons. Translated from French by Arthur knodel and Ingolf Dahl(Harvard University Press), 1947, pp.56.57. Contents from lectures held 1939-40.

the collection *Treatise* comprising 193 pages of enigmatic graphic notations - in the "pure" form without explanations. Dubravko Detoni published a large collection, *Graphik IV,* 22 pages of graphic notations in a visual language more directly suggesting what to play in terms of heavy-light, massive-dispersed etc. Anestis Logothetis and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati also made some contributions to the repertoire of totally open graphic notations, notwithstanding the fact that they for the largest part specialised in limited openness: Logothetis employed a timeline and symbols for the twelve tones, Haubenstock-Ramati created "mobiles" of small elements often traditionally notated, the sequence of which in performance.

Still other relevant composers include Earle Brown who could move in his compositions between a variety of notations, and he is the author of *December 1952,* a graphic score of rectangles taking inspiration from mobile sculptures by Calder. Chr. Wolff made the structure of some of his compositions rely on mutual reactions between players through co-called cue sysems, thus co-pioneering what was later called game pieces. The *Fluxus* movement both performed and published text scores from around 1960. The aleatoric techniques used by Penderecki and a host of Polish and other composers are, likewise but on a smaller scale, oriented towards use of random procedures.



Since the famous *Folio* series from 1952/53, Earle Brown created several pieces in a series called Folio II. Above: *Folio II, 1980* From Hat ART CD 6176, 1995.

The ideas of indeterminacy put forward by John Cage belong to the "opening up" field on a general level, but Cage was not in favour of improvisation, and his compositions generally do not directly encourage it. In USA, Pauline Oliveros created meditative text scores with a meditative aim, a special genre strikingly similar to those by Stockhausen. The hippies and the 68-movement brought an interest for

Eastern philosopies and meditation to the West, and Cage popularised the Zen philosophy, not least through his anecdotes.

The way Karlheinz Stockhausen developed openness in his compositions shows both the invention of different structural approaches and sensitivity to the historic context. Already in 1956 he had composed Zeitmasse for wind quintet in which tempi could be altered individually and gradually and thus move beyond the traditional grid of rhythmic values. In 1966 he was provoked by the death of a colleague in 1966 and asked himself why the composition process had to be so long and laborious, comparing it to what could be the case with visual artists. His compositional reaction was the wind quintet ADIEU which again employed individual tempi, now with details determined by the musicians. In the subsequent development in the late sixties then came "plus-minus" notated works, as Kurzwellen, Plus-Minus, Sternklang, Solo, Spiral, in which changes within individual parameters were prescribed with + - signs, and = meant no change. Parameters were pitch, dynamics, number of events. Which parameters to vary and when to go to the next section was to a high degree up to performers, as was also the choice of material to play. Such sophisticated use of exact parameter thinking (on the direct background of serial composition) determining outlines only, not all details, was further elaborated in the two collections *From the Seven Days* and *For Times to Come*, 31 pieces in all as I count them. The first of all these were created during a personal crisis in 1968, and the last one was dated 1970. Suggestions to players could be metaphorical, like "play a vibration in the rhythm of the universe" but in the context of a disciplined variation and transformation of such an element, not quite unlike the previousplus-minus - manner. The text pieces are indeed different, spanning from straightforward poetic and down-to-earth instruction to pieces making special meditative demands. Stockhausen called these pieces *"intuitive music"*, avoiding the word improvisation which he saw as extemporising of already known elements. As the pieces show, there is ample inspiration from previously experienced composition principles, especially serialism used as a global form principle beyond the filigree detailing of the fifthies. So tradition and innovation were beautifully combined. And in several cases of discoveries of how to open up the composition method there was a challenge coming from his human context, leading to a more direct approach to communicating musical ideas.

In these days, there was a strong framework of written publishing with the large multinational publishers, tending to provide for it an equal status with traditional composition. Even before internet times, compositions could then fast become widely known and discussed in their technical and notational details. Once adopted into the catalogues, many of these scores and collections are still (2025) for sale. Some contemporary music history writers, if only some, include it in their surveys, and with some delay, more and more of books have appeared.

Within contemporary music in Europe, such work remained controversial. Composers I met would often say they did not like to lose control over their works and individual shaping of the music. Pressure from the market situation probably plays a significant role and still does: many of the conservaroty musicians are to earn their future living from older classical music. While experimental and new music written in the traditional way might still be considered for performance now and then with some difficulty, a totally new performance practise requires a departure from usual rehearsal routines which are based on fast sight-reading and limited playing through. With such demands for effectiveness in the air, there could be a feeling of safety in the traditional composers' role and a temptation to post-rationalise the clinging to traditional working methods, not least for those whose living depends on it. Consider the encouraging effect a new commission may have on a composer. If (s)he is offered it along with an explicit demand for an open work, will the composer not become inspired to carry it out? Test it! Workshops offering more workshop-like contexts and opportunities for musicians over more time could provide a change.

In GIM, The Group for Intuitive Music, we had rounds of composing, playing each others' open pieces. This way, we could unfold our own ideas and yet become inspired by each others' ideas.

After 1980. Games and pluralism.

The interaction-based method of composing presented earlier by Christian Wolff had a follower in John Zorn's *game pieces.* The idea of propagating the notion of 'game' with composition for improvisors was not new, but the reputation and acceptance "*Cobra"* (1984) earned could indicate that the ideas behind were a vigorous response to needs of the time. A decisive idea for Zorn was not to prescribe any specific music material to use, since he knew that the players he was thinking of were very different

musicians. This way they were free to bring themselves into the process, in a way similar to free improvisation, but in a highly complex game. The piece features a 'prompter' similar to a conductor, but the role of this person is to be a moderator for proposals coming from the musicians. So, the process will by necessity become a non-linear one, progressing from one event to another, like a sports match. And since there are no stylistic demands for playing it, it is a radical manifestation of pluralism, as already touched upon under "A look at free improvisation" above. One can imagine it appeared natural to listeners, because fixed relations between social groups and the music they listen to were less in force after 1980 than before. Other composers took up the idea.

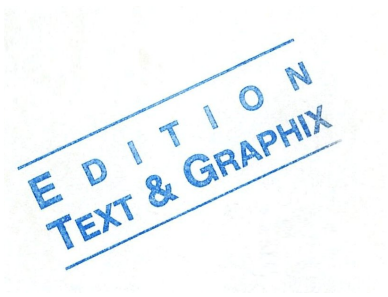
During the late 2010's I came into contact with an international network of gamers who do not consider themselves musicians and play for themselves, just like people gathering to play board or card games. The concept of game opens up for a new kind of viewing the psychological and social processes involved. Warsaw, with Adam Izaak Wasążnik, appears to be a center.

Innovations of notation and improvisation were since 1980 not fashionable with composers as before. But a number of emerging composers devoted their activity to them in a focused way - Henrik Ehland Rasmussen, Ruedi Debrunner, Cat Hope, Makoto Nomura, Michael R.Boyd, Jacob Thompson-Bell, Dmitri Papavasileou, Christoph Herndler, Laura Toxværd, Moss Freed, Carl-Ludwig Hübsch, Alexis Porfiriadis come to my mind. Out of these the last five have written theoretical texts to clarify and deepen out their methods. Thus Porfiriadis has written a Ph D about the decision-taking in performance of open compositions.

Maybe on the background of greater tolerance in this period towards hierachies in music collaboration, composition for orchestra came up. King Ubü Orchestrü practising a disciplined form of free improvisation, seemingly based on collectively developing material proposed by shifting members during playing, and was founded 1984. More traditionally controlled works but still with a focus on freedom in performance were created by Anthony Braxton and Simon H. Fell. Likewise, *conducted improvisation* was begun 1974 by Walter Thompson who called his method using hand-signs for pre-defined sound categories "Soundpainting". Butch Morris joined the tendency with his own version around 1985 and toured with London Improvisors Orchestra in 1998 which grew out of his touring ensemble and

continued on its own creating its own pieces. Other large ensembles include Splitterorchester and the Improvisors Orchestras in Prague and Dortmund.

Commercial distribution through the large publishing houses decreased. But the internet made it easy to distribute scores and exchange them. Even video scores became possible to share. In Denmark, the composers' publisher organisation *edition-s.dk* launched a "Text & Graphix" series in its catalogue in the 1990s.



First logo for the "Text and Graphix" edition
from edition-s.dk

Release practise

With CDs becoming the common medium for music releasing and eventually audio editing available for all, various attitudes and methods could be discerned in the vast repertoire of improvised music. Free improvisations were in a number of cases documented without changes like shortenings etc. and some authors indicated this in the material. Thus the listener could follow the entire context of the piece in question and could co-experience, like at the concert, how the different parts lead to one another. In other cases an editing was undertaken that could involve shortenings and strict selection of excerpts. In some cases the editing went so far that it would be adaequate to see it as creating a new sound art composition with the material - Bob Ostertag is one composer having worked this way.

Greyzones in composition, authorship and perception.

Gruppo Nuova Consonanza was mentioned above under Free Improvisation. It worked out its pieces by rehearsing and letting them get into an agreed form. As I have understood this, it happened by collective discussion, rather than by Evangelisti delivering recipes. When so, there is no confusion about the authorship, it rests by the Collective.

However, I have the impression that in not few cases, pieces presented at concerts have basically one author, having perhaps been assisted just a little by the collective. having been developed aided by verbal suggestions. In some of these cases, ideas too good to be held private have been developed. I will therefore suggest that you who make your own concert piece this way consider the benefits of becoming composers

by documenting and sharing the recipe, with graphic and verbal means. It does take some effort to write things down so as to be understandable for outsiders. But it can well be worth the effort. Wouldn't it be great to hear the piece played by others?

A quite different issue is about ensembles being dissatified with one composer claiming the rights for what they see as collective work. One solution can indeed be to divide the rights between all, taking the necessary paperwork. In some cases, when appropriate, one can alternatingly play each others' pieces.

Critics may sometimes appear to think open compositions are 'too composed' or 'too improvised'. Chances are, however, that they have not realised why a balance is needed between these poles.

The magic

A score can for me be like an architectural design that illuminates the inner structure of even a large, labyrinthic phenomenon. It empowers me so to speak to see around corners with the ears.

On such magic, composer Jean-Yves Bosseur has written:

> *...to translate an idea as concisely as possible... to perceive it as a strong organism, with all its potentials"* [8]

So let's create compositions which are strong organisms - which communicate their very idea, which do not drown the reading with details, which can be played again and still appear new, which induce appetite within the musicians to play them and induce aesthetic fascination with the audience members.

***

[8] Le Temps de le Prendre. Paris (Editions Kim), 1997, p.15

Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen - C.V.

as of September 2025.

Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen was born in Copenhagen in 1951.

In 1970 he began music studies at Copenhagen University. From the next year on active in the Group for Alternative Music. Its members composed, played each other's works, improvised, published a magazine and organized concerts. 1983-2014 assistant teacher at Music Therapy, Aalborg University, responsible for teaching and examination in the subjects of Intuitive Music and Graphic Notation which he has developed. In 1984 he finished his studies as cand.phil (similar to MA) with a mag.art. thesis in Danish: "Investigations around the Concept and Role of Experiment in Western Art Music since 1945".
The development of notations which leave room for the creativity of the musicians is of central importance to him. Often one finds in his works a complex sound pattern changing in gradual ways.
He plays piano, organ, French horn and various small instruments.

He has played among other places in Group for Intuitive Music (1975-), ABFA with John Tchicai and Jan Kaspersen (1978-79), and in Intuitive Music Group (1990-). He also played with among others Frode Andersen, Lotte Anker, Peter Friis Nielsen, Hasse Poulsen, Morten Carlsen, Peter Ole JÃ¸rgensen, Kresten Osgood, Steve Beresford, Rhodri Davies, Mark Sanders, Heiner Metzger, Blaise Siwula, Mauro Orselli, Luca Miti, Nina Polaschegg, Ge-Suk Yeo, Günter Heinz, Hans Fjellestad, Stephen Nachmanovitch, Kumi and Yu Wakao, Hideo Ikegami, Haruhiko Okabe, Camilla Barrat-Due, Gerd Rieger, Viola Kramer, Jack Wright, Glasgow Improvisors Orchestra.

As a composer he collaborated with among others Baird contemporary Ensemble, NYC (with Yvar Mikashoff and Jan Williams), Karl-Erik Welin, ensembles Edges (with David Ryan, UK), Vestjysk Kammerensemble (DK), Madam Press (DK), IST (Mark Wastell, Rhodri Davies, Simon H. Fell, UK), MW2 (P), Septima Practica (AR), SkrÃ¦p (DK), GRIPI (F), Kwartludium (P), Moscow Contemporary Ensemble (RU), Makoto Nomura (JAP), Michal Górczyński (PL) as well as many others.

Radio lectures, organisational work, publications. Practising music therapist 1984-2014.

Courses in Intuitive Music (improvisation/composition) of more than one day outside Aalborg University: Danish Society for Music Therapy Svendborg (DK) 85, Musikhögskolan Stockholm (Sweden) 89, Musica Artes Växjö (Sweden) 90, Conservatory of Krakow (Poland) 94, Conservatory of Funen (DK) 94+01, Creative Music Festival Kawamotocho (Japan) 99, Novosibirsk State Conservatoire (Russia) 03, DKDM (Royal Danish Conservatory of Music) 12, Birmingham Conservatoire (UK) 14, Föreningen Svenska Tonsätare Stockholm (Society of Swedish Composers) 15, Rhythmic Music Conservatory (DK) 15.

Various official commissions and prices. Represented at Numus Festival 1988 (DK), Composers' Biennale 1992 and 1996 (DK), Warsaw Autumn 2016 (PL) and Nordic Music Days 2019 (N). A number of his compositions are published by www.edition-s.dk. 2015-16 censor at postgraduate composers' exams at the Royal Danish Academy of Music

Member of Danish Composer's Society, the former London Musicians' Collective and German Ring für Gruppenimprovisation.

Performances in 25 countries.

***